WT Kendall MRCVS: Inaugural address to the Mutual Improvement Society on the deck of the SS “Somersetshire”, Friday 2nd January 1880

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The 16th AVA Kendall Oration “Political sustainability of the veterinary profession”\(^1\) was
delivered by Senator Chris Back at the recent AVA Conference in Canberra on 22nd May
2012. On 23rd May I visited the Petherick Reading Room in the National Library to examine
a pamphlet: Narrative of a voyage from England to Australia in the SS “Somersetshire”
1879-80 with notes on ship life by a passenger\(^2,3,4\). This was the voyage on which William
Tyson Kendall, in whose honour the AVA Kendall Oration is named, was a passenger. The
pamphlet had been discovered during an online search of documents on the Trove website\(^5\).
As our veterinary history records had not mentioned this 24-page pamphlet I was interested to
see if Kendall’s name had been recorded. After finding WT Kendall MRCVS and another
qualified veterinarian, TC Dobson MRCVS, had been named I sought permission from the
librarian to photograph each page of this fragile document for research purposes.

The following is reproduced from pages 11 and 12:

**LECTURES, DEBATES, &c.**

Some of the passengers thinking it desirable to form a Mutual Improvement Society, a
meeting was called for New Year’s Eve, and the idea carried out; Mr W.T. Kendall,
M.R.C.V.S., being appointed president, Mr Harris vice-president, Mr A Bell
secretary, and Messrs G.A. Robinson, Daglish, Atherton, Daniels, and White being
elected on the committee. A few simple rules were adopted, and on the following
Friday evening the first meeting under the auspices of the association was held on the
main deck, and the president delivered the inaugural address. In some well-chosen
and carefully expressed remarks, Mr Kendall called the attention of his audience to
the necessity of each one doing his individual best to assist in the maintenance of
order and the promotion of good-fellowship, so that the proceedings of the society
might reflect credit on, and be beneficial to, all connected with it. He further
expressed the hope that they would not fail in the object for which the association had
been formed – namely, the “mutual improvement” of all who took part in their
meetings. He always found that the best way of increasing knowledge was by an
interchange of ideas and he asserted that there was no individual on board, no matter
how low he ranked in the scale of intelligence, who could not impart some
information which would prove serviceable to the recipients. The varied experiences of different persons, even under precisely similar circumstances, had frequently shown that one individual profited much more that another by his observations; and he trusted that each one among them would show a cheerful willingness to benefit the others by imparting some item, or other of useful information. The eyes being the windows of the mind, and the ears its doors, it behoved every man to keep the former clean and the latter open, if he desired to improve in knowledge. Any one taking part in a debate could not fail to reap a double benefit, for, by imparting his mite of information, he not only fitted himself to become a more useful member of society, but also accustomed himself to public speaking. Mr Kendall was loudly applauded at the close of his address, from which I have quoted pretty extensively, as it contains some most excellent sentiments, which I am sure, will be appreciated by my readers.”

The narrative records: “Our third subject was “Pleuropneumonia”, and it was thoroughly well handled by Mr Kendall, our president”, and on page 14: Mr WT Kendall was in the Chair for a Miscellaneous Concert held on Saturday Evening, 17th January 1880.

Mr TC Dobson MRCVS is mentioned in a section “Athletic Sports”commencing on Page 16:

“We are much indebted to Mr TC Dobson MRCVS, one of our genial fellow passengers, for the inauguration of several pedestrian competitions and other athletic sports, which created for us some very pleasant excitement. The gentleman referred to not only collected the subscriptions which formed our “prize fund”, but also fulfilled the duties of referee and timekeeper, in a sportsmanlike manner that reflected greatly to his credit, and added largely to his popularity”

TC Dobson MRCVS was the foreman of the Jury in a Court of Enquiry held to try an Irish passenger in steerage accused of stealing fowls from the hen-coop. Unlike WT Kendall MRCVS, whose name is still remembered in 2012, the name of TC Dobson MRCVS has not appeared on any list of qualified veterinarians in Australia.

The abstract of the log of the SS Somersetshire on Page 5 of the pamphlet shows the ship was sailing in the Great Australian Bight when WT Kendall MRCVS celebrated his 29th birthday on 10th February 1880.
Kendall’s inaugural address to the Mutual Improvement Society was presented 50 years before Dr WAN Robertson delivered the first Kendall Oration in Canberra at the Australian Institute of Anatomy on 2nd September 1930. Geoff Niethe, AVA President 1998-99, commented after reading the narrative: “Our veterinary forefathers were certainly big picture and inclusive at such an early age, and it wasn’t only the destination that was important but also the journey.”

A continuing challenge for registered veterinarians in Australia is to provide “serviceable” contributions to the political, intellectual, social and athletic development of the communities in which they live as did WT Kendall MRCVS and TC Dobson MRCVS for the passengers on the SS “Somersetshire” during the 55-day voyage from England to Australia in 1879-80.

Professor Emeritus Ivan Caple AM

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3. A pdf of pamphlet has been forwarded to the Librarian, AVA Max Henry Memorial Library.


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